

# STREET THEATRE

## The Right to Perform

THE PEOPLE'S ANGER at the steep hike in the fares by the Delhi Transport Corporation was expressed in many different ways. The most popular was organised picketing of DTC buses and deflating their tyres. The police dealt with this show of the peoples' disapproval of the fare-hike in the only way they know. Lathi charging the peaceful picketeers, kicking and dragging women by their hair, arresting nearly 1,500 people and bringing serious criminal charges against them to boot.

Another expression of the peoples' anger was a street-play called *DTC Ki Dhandli (DTC's Fraudulence)* put up by Jan Natya Manch. The group came out on the streets on February 8, the day the new fare became effective, and started performing it in the Connaught Place areas. Large crowds watched the 15-minute play joining the actors in raising anti-DTC slogans at the end of the performance. The beat policemen tried to disrupt the performances but were hooted away by the audience. By four in the afternoon the performers had reached the Shivaji Stadium bus stop. Just when they were preparing to begin their play they were stopped by a group of policemen who appeared determined this time not to let the performance take place. However, the performers with the support of the public were able to force the police to withdraw. The play was performed in front of an audience exceeding 500. Just as the play ended, a very large contingent of policemen arrived, armed with rifles, tear gas equipment and lathis. They began lathi charging the audience and the actors. The SHO leading the attack ordered the arrest of the actors. Two of the actors were dragged to the waiting police van and driven straight to the Mandir Marg police station. Some of the actors received lathi blows while dispersing.

Inside the police station the two actors were treated like common criminals. Their request to use the telephone was greeted with choice invectives which were hurled at them with a graphicness achievable only by policemen.

They were detained at the police station for four hours before being let off with the warning that they will be charged with

obstructing traffic, breach of peace and assault on public servants if they dared perform again. No charges were brought against them.

The artists of Delhi reacted to this incident with remarkable promptness. A statement was issued by them denouncing the police for interrupting a dramatic performance and arresting two actors. The artists called this act 'a gross violation of the democratic right of the artistes to perform in front of the people' and declared that 'they will not tolerate such acts of barbaric suppression of artistes'. Among the signatories were Bhisham Sahni, Vishnu Prabhakar, Hans Raj Rahbar, MK Raina, Dadi Padumji, Manjit Bawa, Vivan Sundaram, Rameshwar Broota and many others. Film makers Saeed Mirza and Kundan Shah, who were in the capital on that day, also put their names on the statements.

The arrest and its denunciation were prominently covered by the Press the next morning. However, when the artistes of Jana-Natya Manch resumed their play the next day in the Karol Bagh area their performance was again disrupted by the police. The same story was repeated throughout the week.

In recent years there has been a marked increase in cases of police atrocities on theatre people in many parts of the country. Groups of street theatre people are detained by the police almost every week in one part of the country or another. In one case (in east U.P. in 1981) the police arrested all the actors of a group as soon as they alighted from the state bus in a provincial town. They were detained in the thana for a whole night and the actress in the group was raped by policemen. In Bihar cases of arrest, torture and even convictions leading to jail terms are legion.

Street theatre has emerged in recent years as a popular medium of expressing the mood of the people. In many states it is becoming a form of giving voice to the organised sections of the peasants, workers and students. Because of its mobility, its effectiveness and its commitment to the cause of the downtrodden, it is looked at with suspicion and hostility by the establishment and the keepers of law and order. The only way the police have adopted to suppress it is to treat it as a law and order problem. They deal with it like the do with any demonstration or assembly. Since there is no law to prevent a dramatic performance in a public place, the police use antediluvian laws continuing from the British days. An actor committed to people's art and wishing to perform in front of large masses is naturally drawn towards street theatre. Proscenium theatre, because of the acute shortage of auditoria and reasons of expense, is able to attract a very small section of the urban upper classes. An actor, director, playwright or singer opts for street

theatre because it takes him closer to his audience and enlarges his area of influence. He goes to public places, where the people gather, to display his art. Parks, market places, bus stops, residential colonies and industrial areas—these are his auditoria. Now if the police takes it upon itself to prevent him from performing in such places in the name of maintaining law and order, where will he go? The attitude of the police is a virtual notice to the street performer to give up his avocation. It is a blatant suppression of an artiste's right to seek out his audiences.

The police does not disrupt the quack who sells spurious medicines, it does not prevent the bandarwala from showing his tricks, nor the snake charmer and what have you. On the other hand, it exploits these people by taking cuts from their daily earnings. The police object to street theatre not because it holds up traffic, which it does not in any case, but because it is political in nature. It suppresses it, attacks it because it takes up topical issues and analyses them scientifically for its audiences. The police in suppressing street theatre acts as an arm of the state which is becoming increasingly intolerant of dissent and protest.

While the attitude of the police is becoming more and more intolerant, it is heartening to note that the community of the artistes, even those not directly involved in street theatre, and the common people are rising in defence of the street theatre artist. Though ultimately it is the support of the ordinary people which will help street theatre survive, there is still need for defending an artiste's right to perform in front of the people. The artistes of Delhi who reacted to the arrest of the two actors of Jana Natya Manch so fast have to give a thought to the question of finding a lasting solution to this problem.

*(February 16, 1986)*



## The Tradition of Street Theatre

STREET THEATRE, as it is known today, can trace its direct lineage no further than the years immediately after the Russian Revolution in 1917.

On the first anniversary of the October Revolution, Vsevolod Meyerhold produced poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffle* in which he combined elements of circus clownery with revolutionary poetry and put it up in the city square for an audience of several thousands. Similar theatrical performances remained popular in various parts of the new workers' state for several years. This was the beginning of a new kind of agit-prop theatre performed on the streets, at factory gates, markets, dockyards, playgrounds, barnyards and so on. Avowedly political in nature, this theatre sought its audiences at their places of work or stay rather than attempting to bring them to the theatre hall. It became a voluntary instrument of the democratic temper of the people and an interpreter of daily events and developments.

This was the route it took all over the world. Within two years of the modern theatre reaching China in the mid-twenties its street avatar, also appeared before the assemblies of workers and peasants uniting behind the Communist Party. Throughout the Long March and after, many mobile theatre groups moved with the peoples' army. In India, it emerged as a natural product of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association's campaign to draw the masses of people into the anti-imperialist struggle. After independence, it allied itself with the democratic forces which continued the fight against the economic and social oppression of the people.

At crucial periods, street theatre appeared in several countries—in Spain during the Civil War, in Vietnam during the 45-year-long war with Japanese, French and US aggressors, in Cuba immediately after the revolution (and continues to be widely practiced even now), all over Latin America and Africa, where national liberation struggles were fought. Even in the USA it became very popular with the Mexican farm workers and Negroes as an instrument of struggle and organisation. It appeared in France during the

turbulent late sixties. In the UK it continued to be popular at workers' gatherings and university campuses.

Anybody who has watched a street theatre performance would characterise it as a militant, protest theatre of political nature, very often with a topical force.

If one tries to determine the tradition of street theatre, one can perhaps establish many formal relationships with various theatrical and quasi-theatrical forms practised over the centuries the world over. For instance, the Bacchanalian festivals in ancient Greece or the pageants in medieval Europe had strong elements of theatre as well as social criticism of a kind. Despite their religious and ritualistic character, they very often contained ribald portions which were not altogether pious and drew their strength from the popular urge to poke fun at the gods and their human custodians. The mountebank shows during the Renaissance (like their counterparts, the madaris in India today) also had elements of social satire which were responsible in no mean measure for their mass appeal. In India, many of our folk dramas have topical references and comic episodes which create humour at the expense of the religious or the secular establishments. The two characters most often ridiculed are the pundit and the kotwal. In that extraordinary fourth century Sanskrit play called *Mrichchakatika*, the Brahminical thief, Sharvalik, actually uses his sacred thread to make measurements before breaking into a house.

However, it is one thing to study the links between the external aspects of street theatre and traditional performing arts, and quite another to present them as street theatre per se, albeit 'traditional'.

But this is just what the cultural wing of the Trade Fair Authority of India did last month. They organised a 16-day festival of Traditional Street Theatre featuring one troupe each from U.P., M.P., Orissa, Assam, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka and two from Rajasthan.

The logic perhaps was that any drama performed in the open, if not actually on the street corner, can be passed off as 'street theatre'. Now, such a loose definition will hardly do. It will be as ridiculous as calling any play in which the hero dies at the end a tragedy. It will be ridiculous not only because all Aristotelians and professors of literature will find it so, but also because such a definition hardly enriches our understanding of either tragedy or the other kind of 'hero dead' play.

Similarly, characterising traditional plays as 'street theatre' is misdefining them on the one hand, and street theatre on the other.

But even by this yardstick not all plays presented at the TFAI festival will qualify as street theatre. Indeed, Rangsampada's (Karnataka) *Sangya Balya* was a 'pucca' stage production complete with lights, elaborate costumes and playback singing to boot. The programme card provided credits, among other things, for stage, props, production management, co-ordination, lights, make-up, costumes and even associate directorship. The troupe had never performed this play on the streets, in the open air or daylight. Their more than hundred performances had all been on regular stages for ticketed or invited audiences. By no stretch of imagination was *Sangya Balya* a street play.

Take Hatbar Kendriya Natya Samaj's (Assam) *Sitaharan Balibadh* in the Ankiya Nat or Bhaona form. When the form originated in the fifteenth century, it had a strong propagandist function. Shankaradeva used it for propagating Vaishnava tenets among the people. It was a kind of mobile, itinerant theatre being carried on the crest of the Bhakti wave which was at that time sweeping the north and north-eastern part of India. Today, what remains of the form is a decayed and stilted version, always performed inside naamghars (prayer hall and satras (monasteries)).

The Prahalad Natak of Orissa was a lavish dance drama requiring a regular acting area with the audience on one side. A heavy and unwieldy wooden platform with four steps is an essential part of the form. It is the stuff for important festive occasions and needs elaborate arrangements. Though it shares with street theatre its vigour and flexibility, it has no mobility, a basic need of street theatre.

I could go on describing the other plays presented in the festival to show how they do not fulfil the minimum requirements of street theatre. But that is not the most important point. The important point is that the very term traditional street theatre is an anachronism. If street theatre has any definite tradition in India, it is the anti-imperialist tradition of our people forged during the freedom movement; in other parts of the world it is the peoples' struggle for a just social and economic order.

Today in India, tradition in the field of theatre and other arts, has come to mean rites, rituals, spiritualism, myths, tales of magic and miracles, colour, costumes and ethnic spectacle. Street theatre rejects this tradition.

In terms of the forms street theatre is adopting, it has more in common with the tradition of theatre developed by Piscator and Brecht rather with the traditional forms of theatre in India. In the west and the socialist countries, its form is most novel and modern. All over the world, including India, the political pamphlet, the poster, wall writing and the agitational speech have all gone into creating the form of street theatre. Street theatre became inevitable when the workers began organising themselves into unions in the mid-nineteenth century. Its arrival became imminent with the emergence of political demonstrations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As such, it is a twentieth century phenomenon, born out of the specific needs of the modern world.

It is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilise them behind fighting organisations. In that sense, its ideological tradition is some 150 years old. Its formal tradition does not go back more than 70 or 80 years. So there is no question of a traditional street theatre.

There have been other attempts to pass different wares in the name of street theatre. Certain groups, backed by official, voluntary and missionary bodies, have tried to propagate things like hygiene, the need for nutritive food and family planning through this form. All such attempts have failed. The form itself resists such efforts at takeover. It will similarly resist the attempt to be appropriated by a tradition which is alien to it.

Indian theatre is being sought to be 'traditionalised' these days. There is no dearth of experts who advise the street theatre activists to seek their inspiration from our folk plays. But since street theatre identifies itself consciously with the needs of the modern world, it establishes a more critical relationship with the past. It knows what to accept and what to reject from tradition.

*(April 6, 1986)*



## Jana Natya Manch

### *The First Ten Years of Street Theatre* *October 1978 - October 1988*

ON OCTOBER 15, we completed ten years of uninterrupted work in street theatre. For us this anniversary was an occasion to self-critically reflect upon what we had achieved in this period, and where we had failed, to look around at the growth of street theatre in other parts of the country and to think about its future. It was also a time to evaluate the position of street theatre in the cultural life of India, and its relationship with the mainstream theatre.

On some of these issues and questions, we wish to share our ideas with our colleagues from the mainstream theatre and other cultural workers. We consider this exercise necessary because there has been an almost total absence of dialogue between street theatre and proscenium theatre and because there is a wide divergence of views regarding the former.

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On the first anniversary of the October Revolution, Vsevolod Meyerhold produced Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe* in which he combined elements of the tent show with revolutionary poetry and put it up in the city square for an audience of several thousand. Similar theatrical performances remained popular in the workers' state for several years. This was the beginning of a new type of agit-prop theatre performed on the streets, at factory gates, markets, dockyards, playgrounds, barnyards and so on. Avowedly political in nature, this theatre sought its audiences at their places of work or residence. It became a voluntary instrument of the democratic temper of the people and an interpreter of daily events. Mass theatrical performances were also staged in city squares at this time to mark major revolutionary anniversaries.

During the grim war years, the Soviet theatre gave a mind-boggling half a million performances at the front—in dug-outs, on lorries, in jungles, inside ruins of demolished buildings, on warships, inside hospitals, etc.



Street theatre has taken much the same route all over the world, although under different historical circumstances. Within a few years of the modern theatre reaching China in the mid-twenties, its street counterpart also appeared before the assemblies of workers and peasants uniting behind the newly founded Communist Party. Many mobile, open air theatre troupes moved with the peoples' army, rousing the people to rally behind the Communists. In India, street theatre emerged as a vehicle of IPTA's campaign to draw the masses of people into the anti-colonial struggle. Immediately after independence it allied itself with the democratic forces which were continuing the fight against the economic and social oppression of the people.

At crucial periods in their history, street theatre has appeared in several countries—in Spain during the Civil War, in Vietnam all through the forty-five-year-long war against Japanese, French and U.S. aggressors, in Cuba immediately after the Revolution, all over Latin America and Africa during national liberation struggles. In U.S.A. it became popular with the Mexican farm workers and the Negroes as an instrument of struggle and organisation. It appeared in France during the turbulent late sixties. Today, it is practiced in Spain, the U.K., West Germany, Holland, Sweden, U.S.S.R., Cuba, U.S.A., the Phillipines, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and many other countries. But nowhere also is it as widely practiced as in India today.

If one were to determine the tradition of street theatre, one can perhaps establish many formal relationships with a number of theatrical and quasi-theatrical forms practiced over the centuries all around the world. For instance, the Bacchanalian festivals in ancient Greece, or the pageants in medieval Europe had strong elements of theatre as well as social criticism of a kind. Despite their ritualistic character they very often contained ribald elements which drew strength from the popular urge to deflate the gods and their human custodians. The Mountebank shows of the Renaissance (like the Madari Tamasha in India today) also had elements of social satire which were responsible in no mean measure, for their mass appeal. In India, much of the folk drama has topical allusions and comic episodes which create humour at the expense of the religious and secular establishment. The two characters most often ridiculed in our folk theatre are the pundit and the kotwal.

Contemporary Indian street theatre has been drawing in equal measure from our folk and classical drama as well as from western theatre. The political pamphlet, the wall poster, the agitational

speech, the political demonstration—these have all gone into creating the diverse forms adopted by our street theatre.

Street theatre had become inevitable when the workers began organising themselves into unions in the nineteenth century. Its arrival became imminent with the emergence of political demonstrations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As such, it is a twentieth century phenomenon, born of the specific needs of the working people living under capitalist and feudal exploitation.

It is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilise them behind fighting organisations.

In India, however, street theatre has developed in a different and more ambitious manner, especially during the last dozen years or so. The street theatre workers of the present generation, unlike the pioneers of the forties and the fifties, have become more conscious of its distinctly formal aspects. While unabashedly accepting the ideological nature of their theatre and its unconcealed alignment with political forces, they are no longer producing only poster plays.

In our view there are two reasons for this new development. Firstly, in our cities with one or two exceptions, there is no tradition of theatre-going. The masses of our urban population have never been to a theatre. Our theatre, even the best of it, has remained mostly confined to a very select group of theatre-goers. The theatre, on its part, has also not been addressing itself to the common, working people. If our urban theatre had been a major cultural force—a living and popular art form reflecting the hopes, aspirations and struggles of the people—then perhaps our street theatre too would have remained only a functional propaganda device, surfacing every now and then to focus attention on burning issues. But since our mainstream theatre is by and large out of tune and touch with the majority of our people, the need remains for a fully developed people's theatre, a theatre which is available to the masses. The street theatre workers now have first hand experience of the artistic inadequacy of poster plays. Such plays serve a purpose, but they satisfy neither the people's need for a fuller theatre, nor the actors' and directors' craving for more challenging and stimulating material. Since conditions have continued to be unfavourable for a mass expansion of proscenium theatre, they have been seriously seeking to develop street theatre itself. Secondly, their long association with street theatre has gradually opened before them the unforeseen possibilities of the

development and flowering of street theatre into a full fledged art form. The circular acting area, the conditions of performance, the proximity of the actor and the spectator have all demanded a new acting style, new dramatic structures, new writing skills, a new kind of training, a new use of music, verse and chorus and a new method of theatre management. Even the audience-performer relationship in street theatre is something unique and new and demands have already led to some amount of serious work on the language, structure, grammar and aesthetics of street theatre.

This new street theatre, though still in its infancy and struggling to discover itself, needs to be seen against the backdrop of its phenomenal expansion. During the last dozen years or so it has spread to almost all corners of India. Today there are hundreds of amateur troupes writing their own plays or freely adapting and translating scripts from other regions and languages and giving an enormous number of performances. *Jana Natya Manch* alone has given 4,300 performances of 22 different plays, in 90 cities, during the last 10 years, seen by over two-and-a-half million people. This body of theatre, though still by and large disregarded by the mainstream-theatre, has today become an inseparable part of the theatrical landscape of India. Especially in North India, after the sharp decline of the already weak proscenium theatre in the past few years, street theatre appears to have become atleast in terms of the number of performances and the size of its audience, the major theatrical activity. In our opinion, today it is not possible to form a complete picture of contemporary Indian theatre without including street theatre.

This brings us to the unfortunate tendency to project street theatre as a rebellion against the proscenium theatre, or as standing in opposition to it. This absolutely erroneous notion has been created by adherents of both kinds of theatre. On the one hand, some exponents of street theatre have tried to counterpoise it against proscenium theatre, dubbing the latter as a bourgeois, decadent and constricting genre, condemning it as a theatre of irrelevance, of airy-fairy philosophy, of frivolity, and concluding thereafter, that a genuine people's theatre is impossible on the proscenium stage; on the other hand a large number of proscenium wallahs have consistently refused even to accept street theatre as a valid form of dramatic art.

In our view it is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theatres. Both belong equally to the people. Yes, there is certainly a contradiction between the proscenium theatre which has been appropriated by the escapists, the



anarchists and the revivalists and the street theatre which stands with the people. Just as there is a contradiction between reactionary proscenium theatre and progressive proscenium theatre, or between democratic street theatre and reformist and sarkari street theatre.

Equally absurd is the tendency to dismiss street theatre as political advertisement or a mobile poster. One reason for such comments is of course the voluntary insulation of the proscenium wallahs from street theatre. It is a fact that most of them have not been able to keep themselves abreast of the latest developments in street theatre. The other equally important reason is the extraordinary amount of shoddy fare that has been produced in the name of street theatre. However, there may be another, deeper reason for such comments.

Historically, proscenium theatre has become a place where one concentrates on the finer and subtler aspects of life, a place for meditation, reflection and introspection. All this is fortified by the serious and formal atmosphere in the hall, the silence and the darkness.

Since this kind of intensity and concentration is not obtainable in a street-situation it is asserted that it is impossible to achieve any depths of analysis or beauty or any force of presentation in street theatre.

We believe, and we are certain you will all agree with us, that the implements and devices of artistic expression are created by the dramatist's creative perception of life, and not the other way round. True, one artist may find it possible to work only within his inherited or acquired discipline. Nobody need quarrel with that. But to reject as incomplete, indeed unrecognisable, one or all disciplines other than his, is wholly unacceptable and unscientific.

Let us be very clear on this. Theatre cannot be dependent on the frills and trappings which surround it. Drama is born with force and beauty in any empty space whether squares, rectangular or circular. The play comes alive whether the spectators are on one or all sides, in darkness or in light. One of the greatest bodies of theatrical work that mankind has ever known, the Greek classical drama, used to be performed in sunlight, in front of some 15,000 people on all three sides of the acting area. Shakespeare performed his plays in the courtyards of inns, market places and gardens. His Globe theatre had the reputation of being one of the noisiest places in London where ale was sold in the pit even as a scene was in progress. Brecht described his ideal audience as one which could smoke and drink while watching the play, and vocally express its

expert opinion of the agent on the stage like soccer or boxing fans at a match. Closer home, many of the most vibrant theatres of India are traditionally performed in the fields or in opens stages. Theatre did not begin with proscenium, nor has its evolution reached the final stage, with it.

Polemics aprart, we believe that street theatre is doing something which is of singular significance. At a time when all forms of community entertainment are fast disappearing, when the video and TV, have started marketing encapsulated entertainment to be consumed at the level of the nuclear family or the individual, street theatre is once again reviving art which can be enjoyed at the community level, in large gatherings. In this sense it is already playing the role that a fully developed and popular theatre should.

We think it is high time that a living relationship was formed between all those who are committed to healthy theatre whether they are in the proscenium theatre or in street theatre. When new approaches to street theatre are being adopted, the theatre fraternity has a role to play in development of new techniques, new skills and new training methods. The established and the gifted playwrights of the mainstream theatre too have a role to play in enriching the repertotre of scripts for the street theatre. The critics have a role to play in devising new criteria for evaluating this theatre in its own terms. The talented directors and teachers have a role to play in helping street theatre realise its potential.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of our street theatre, we extend an invitation to our colleagues in the mainstream theatre to cooperate with us in developing and enriching our street theatre.

*(October 29, 1988)*



# Concept of People's Theatre

## *A Jana Natya Manch Experience*

L A L U R A M, a textile worker in the outskirts of Delhi, had never come to the theatre. He had not heard of Triveni, Kamani, Shriram Centre or AIFACS, the Meccas and Medinas of Delhi theatre. So, the theatre went to him, at his doorstep. This was when Jana Natya Manch started its post-emergency performances of street theatre. This can be termed as the start of the concept of peoples' theatre at the peoples' doorstep. Founded in 1973, Janam had been staging socially relevant, timely and progressive plays in Delhi and around. Its principal audiences had been the working class, students and the lower middle class in their own localities. Janam strongly believes that these are the classes who are exposed to and seriously affected by the degenerating impact of the present-day Indian films, the only cheap and available entertainment for the masses. Most Indian commercial films today are preoccupied with crime, sex and superimposed westernised elitist values not conducive to the healthy growth of a genuine people's culture. To provide these sections of the population with an alternative culture was the main objective which prompted Janam to take its theatre to the people. Jana Natya Manch's short street plays not only provide casual alternative cultural entertainment but also can inform, educate and help mobilise the common man towards popular democratic and mass movements. Precisely that is how Janam has become an inseparable part of the trade union movement in and around Delhi.

Any gathering of organised or unorganised workers, students or any group of general public can be an occasion for Janam to stage their playlets. A circle of 15-20 feet radius and people around it is sufficient for it to stage a play. A students' convention against communalism, authoritarianism and unemployment; a demonstration against computerisation; a preparatory meeting for some working class rally; strikes and lockouts; literary seminars or even the victory celebrations of trade unions can be the right opportunity for a performance by Janam. The themes of its plays always keep a close touch with popular mass movements. Its plays on communal riots, the defective education system, the Industrial

Relations Bill, women's emancipation, or the political economy of the bus-fare hike achieved phenomenal success only because of the emotional nearness of the themes to the everyday life of the people. For that matter all street plays have to be bold, succinct and direct; and so they are. These aspects of street theatre are necessitated by its limitations of time, space and money.

In order to keep itself alive and involved in the day-to-day people's movement, it can't afford to wait for relevant scripts to be written by professional and celebrated dramatists. Involvement of culture with people's movements requires immediate analysis of the current political and socio-economic developments and preparing a new play on that within a day or two, if not in a couple of hours. This leaves no scope for professionals and celebrities to come into the picture. In this matter Janam is not dependent on any professional's services. It is competent enough to write, design, visualise, direct and present plays on its own. All the script writing, designing, direction, music composing, etc. are done collectively in Janam.

In 1973, when the Delhi branch of IPTA almost became inactive and defunct, a few members came out of it and formed Jana Natya Manch. Its first play was a Bengali play *Mrityur Atit (After Death)* by Utpal Dutt. Thereafter *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata*, a satirical play in Hindi by Ramesh Upadhyay on the misuse of election machinery was taken up and shown in the far-flung working class colonies and factory gates in addition to colleges, public parks and middle class areas. It was also staged in a few towns of U.P. during the 1974 mid-term assembly elections.

After that Janam took up Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena's *Bakri*, a musical play on contemporary politics. About 20 shows of this play were done on makeshift stages in different areas of Delhi.

During May/June '75 Janam started street plays with a short skit *Janata Pagal Ho Gai Hai*. This play, showing police atrocities on the public, was performed about 20 times in different parts of Delhi till June 25, 1975.

After the end of emergency, Janam staged Asghar Wajahat's full length play *Firangi Laut Aye*, a play on the 1857 uprising. In April/May another full length play on the ruthless emergency raj, Utpal Dutt's *Ab Raja Ki Bari Lai (Enter, the King)* was staged, but only for a few shows.

Due to the high cost and resources involved in these full length plays and paucity of usual sponsors, mainly the trade unions, totally shattered and impoverished during the nightmare of the emergency, not many shows could be done. But Janam felt the huge

cultural gap before the demoralised working class and decided to fill it up with an alternative healthy culture. At this specific juncture the need for low cost and need based topical theatre was seriously felt. Hence the necessary drift to street theatre.

Its first post emergency street play *Machine*, depicting the machinations of the establishment in collusion with the police and security forces against industrial dissent, just coincided with the first ever all-India all trade union rally against the Industrial Relations Bill at the Boat Club on November 20, 1978. This play helped to rejuvenate the morale of a working class audience of about one lakh at the joint rally. Since then over 70 shows of this play have been done, mainly in working class audiences.

Janam's next street play *Gaon se Shahar Tak* is a generalised visualisation of the plight of landless peasants, urban workers, students and the middle class which ends with the call for a united struggle.

In December '78 the news of communal riots in Aligarh shook the country and within a week Jana Natya Manch was out in the streets with its play *Hatyarey*, analysing the political and economic factors which antagonise the traditionally harmonious co-existence of two communities. Performance of this play, ironically, coincided with the second phase of communal violence let loose on the common people of Aligarh. Contrary to Janam's apprehension, they have in fact strengthened the communal harmony by performing this play in troubled, sensitive and minority localities.

In February '79, the state owned Delhi Transport Corporation burdened the common commuter by suddenly raising its fares sky high. Within 24 hours, Jana Natya Manch took the 12-minute play *DTC Ki Dhandhli* to the bus stops exploring the political economy of the fare hike including mismanagement, corruption and rackets of the top bureaucracy. Instant success of the play was evident from the mass appeal and participation it received along with the conversion of each show into a street corner meeting in protest against the fare-hike. This play was shown to about 30 thousand people in 35 performances in different bus-stops of Delhi within a week. Ultimately, the corporation had to partially withdraw the raised fares and even rationalise the fare structures being followed prior to the hike.

JANAM's next play "Aurat", depicting the plight of working women, is an universally successful play. Primarily written for and first staged to meet the specific requirements of the first Northern Indian Working Women's Conference (CITU), this play has been performed over 70 times till now. In several glimpses it shows the



various stages of women's life as a daughter, as a wife, as a student, as a mother, as an unemployed young woman, as a worker and finally as a revolutionary; all within 27 minutes. The argument of the play is that women's struggle for equality is only a part of the broader united struggle of the working classes.

In July '79 many All India students and youth organisations of divergent opinions converged in Delhi for a seminar on authoritarianism and communalism. The seminar focussed attention on unemployment, educational reforms and lowering of the voting age to 18 years. This congregation of students from all over India was presented with the 15 minute play "Teen Crore", specially in incorporating the three problems facing our student and youth. Thereafter it was performed in various colleges also.

The seventh general elections to the Lok Sabha was the most topical issue in the recent years. Being neither an affiliate of any political party nor being willing to propagate for any, but still very eager to dramatise the national issue, it was caught into a big ideological fix for some time. But Jana Natya Manch's collective wisdom was soon able to overcome this just by visualising the important authoritarian and communal incidents from June '75 to July '79. This play, "Aya Chunao", without suggesting whom to vote for, was extensively shown in different constituencies in and around Delhi, including rural areas.

In March '80, when 15 different women's and students organisations joined together to protest against rape and sexual harassment of women with special attention on the Mathura rape case, Jana Natya Manch was also not left behind. Although JANAM didn't agree with the Joint Action Committee's treatment of rape as an isolated phenomenon, it did use its agit-prop street theatre to mobilise public opinion to join the women's day rally on 8th March. The play, "Police Charitram", depicted increasing police involvement in rape and sexual harassment of women. Fifteen performances were given in five days.

Due to the topicality and mass involvement of all these plays the audience participation has become a regular feature with Jana Natya Manch. It gets regular suggestions from its audience about improvements and themes of new plays. Its plays on DTC and the elections were suggested by their regular audience only.

More suggestions are in hand like price rise, unemployment, poverty, management sponsored unions etc. Now people have even started expecting JANAM to bring out plays on recent incidents like the dissolution of state assemblies and the lathi charge on the blinds.

To meet the increasing demand for an alternative and healthy cultural form they have to often go out of Delhi. They have performed all these plays in Bombay, Patna, Sriganaganagar, Suratgarh, Bhiwani, Hissar, Sonapat, Faridabad, Allahabad and Patna. In many towns like Kurukshetra, Hissar, Bhiwani, Kanpur, Lucknow, Patna, Katihar, Malda, Siliguri, Mainpuri, Bareilly, Raipur, Mathura, Jaipur many groups have been formed using Jana Natya Manch scripts. Its plays have been translated and performed into Bengali, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada also. This way Jana Natya Manch is almost leading an All India Peoples' theatre movement emanating from the Hindi heartland.